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Fort Myers Fear and American Armageddon

By DAVID LIEBER

Their's is a retirement club where no one chats about the weather. There is no small talk about charity projects or how the grandchildren are doing. The problems are too grave for that.

The frightened men and women who gather on Saturdays in a back room of the Fort Myers Country Club have but one goal: To save western civilization.

To them, detente is a bad joke. Pearl Harbor could happen tomorrow. And the bleeding-heart Americans who have weakened America's once proud intelligence agencies are some of the best friends the Kremlin ever had.

For years, Southwest Florida has served as a retirement haven for former CIA, FBI and military intelligence officers who left their cloak and dagger life-style behind for some final years of peaceful sunshine.

However, in recent years the retired spooks have watched in horror as America's intelligence agencies have weakened under sharp attacks over alleged abuses documented in the news media and in congressional investigations.

A few years ago, some of the more active retirees formed a local chapter of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFIO), a national lobbying group which aims to alter the tarnished image of the American spy.

Southwest Florida spies do not take their mission lightly. They sincerely believe the survival of mankind may well depend on the revitalization of American intelligence capabilities and also

Members speak at churches and club meetings, write letters to newspaper editors and appear on radio talk shows. Nonetheless, the 32 local members remain frustrated.

They warn that the Soviet threat is increasing. There are more communists throughout the world than ever before, they caution, and their ability to infiltrate our way of life is as strong as ever because we don't recognize their power. "We are our own worst enemies," members repeat over and over.

If nothing else, association members give support to one another. It has not been easy for them to see their once noble profession disgraced. At a recent three-hour meeting in Fort Myers, the members traded war stories, recommended pro-intelligence books to each other and discussed the latest news of the

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Still, amid all their despair about the future, a tiny streak of hope could be found in at least one old spy who rose to speak.

"I'm an old intelligence officer who reads and watches the news, and I'm worried," former military intelligence officer Gateley Daniel told his peers. "I'm not going to sell us short yet. I'm still an optimist. I don't believe we're that close to Domsday. There's still a lot of strength in this country mainly because people like us are sitting around and doing what we're doing today."